

State-CSX container move worries Elkridge

Transfer station to move from Dundalk

By Larry Carson and Michael Dresser, The Baltimore Sun

6:32 PM EST, February 26, 2011

Howard County officials have postponed a decision about a site for a new school in Elkridge this week, citing concerns among neighbors that the state is eyeing their backyard as a site for a new rail transfer facility.

Howard's school board delayed voting Thursday night on a plan to build a badly needed elementary school on a 20-acres donated by a developer next to Coca Cola Drive, where big trucks carrying cargo containers could rumble 24 hours a day, 7 days a week if an adjacent parcel is chosen for the transfer facility. County officials want the 600-seat school open by August 2013.

State transportation officials are deciding among a dozen possible rail facility locations for a CSX container transfer facility, which is moving from Dundalk to a rail-side location along the Howard, Anne Arundel or Prince George's county borders.

The rail plan is intended to both free more cargo space at the port while moving the container transfer station south of Baltimore's antiquated 19th-century Howard Street train tunnel to allow CSX to stack containers two-high on railroad cars for movement to Midwestern markets.

"They want to be on the main line, their Camden Line, south of the Howard Street tunnel," said Leif Dormsjo, chief of staff to Maryland Transportation Secretary Beverly Swaim-Staley. The search is on for easily accessible sites of under 100 acres, zoned for industrial use, environmentally suitable, where a big crane could work moving containers from trucks to trains.

Howard officials said they were told one site might be on the west side of Hanover Road, between Race Road and the railroad tracks, very close to the border with Anne Arundel County. This site is also close to Route 100 and the 122-acre Oxford Square mixed-use development planned by Preston Partners of Towson. That project includes the free land and \$4 million cash to help build a school.

"While our short-term needs are dire, we must also think long-term," said Jill Bateman, a board member of the Greater Elkridge Community Association, who urged the school board delay its decision.

Council Chairman Calvin Ball, an east Columbia Democrat, said a second site could be in Jessup, though a decision is likely many months away.

"I really hope this is a thorough and extensive review process," Ball said.

Before a location is chosen, Dormsjo said, state and CSX officials must discuss it with Federal Railroad Administration officials to see if federal funding will be available, using a process laid out in the National Environmental Policy Act to choose a site.

"The reality is, the state has to follow a certain federal process to identify a site, but Elkridge is definitely in the mix," said County Councilwoman Courtney Watson, a Democrat who represents Elkridge.

Railroad spokesman Robert Sullivan and state transportation officials insist that as many as a dozen possible locations along the tracks could be chosen and there will be a transparent public process once the list is narrowed.

"What we're trying to avoid is the community getting upset with something they're not ever going to have to worry about," said Maryland transportation spokesman Jack Cahalan. "We are committed to an open, full analysis," he added.

Still, Elkridge residents and their elected officials are worried about the potential impact of such a facility, especially since the 1,000-apartment community and school site are very close by, across Route 100 from the Dorsey MARC train station. Bateman said her group believes that their community is the favored spot for the project, though Cahalan questioned that there's any real basis for that idea.

"This would be a quarter-mile or less from the school," said GECA president Howard Johnson. He said his group is seeking more information before deciding on a firm position, including whether hazardous materials would be in any of the containers.

"My concerns are that state and CSX show us that if the project ends up being in Elkridge, that it won't [negatively] affect the quality of life for local residents," said Watson.

Howard County legislators are planning to discuss the issue at a delegation meeting Wednesday in Annapolis requested by Del. James E. Malone, who represents Elkridge. He and Del. Steve DeBoy, both Democrats, recently learned of the plan, they each said.

"We just found out, literally," DeBoy said Wednesday. "I am absolutely opposed to putting it in a residential community," he said. Malone said he's still trying to gather more information.

The school board told staff officials to begin planning for a 600-student school without specifying a site to get the preparations under way in hopes that the rail issue will be decided in the next few months.

Baltimore Sun Reporter [Joe Burris](#) contributed to this article.

larry.carson@baltsun.com

michael.dresser@baltsun.com